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Four poems

Barry Keane


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Barry Keane is, by choice, a truly migrant poet, born in Ireland, but living in Poland, renegotiating the categories of home and abroad, distance and nearness, familiarity and strangeness. A task he has been also undertaking in his exquisitely crafted poems, which look beyond the border to the country he left behind, but are equally responsive to the place he has become part of. This new place has been appropriated in the most accurate manner available to the poet: by acquiring its language and by studying the art of this language, Polish literature. His poems, which “carry him away and take him home”, are poetic palimpsests in which Irish cadences, memories, and landscapes have been overwritten with Polish images, names and narratives. From among the many traditions of Polish writing that Barry Keane has been attracted to, the closest to his poetic sensibility seems the poetry of the inter-war period, and primarily of the *Skamander* group. It is to one of the leading *Skamander* poets that he dedicates his poem “Lechoń’s Last Night”. What he shares with them are qualities not foreign to readers of Irish verse: the classical clarity of vision, precise, direct diction, the concreteness of imagery, the measured pace of lines. His new poems, as well as his much praised translations from Polish, have become the synergic foci of an informed intercultural dialogue, unique literary rapprochements, making Barry Keane a voice to be listened to. (*Jerzy Jarniewicz*)

“Running in Bielany forest”

Along the rail-track out of Greystones,
Wicklow town out far ahead
in the low-flying distance,
I would run in a sunlit world
on days when the sea was crystal-clad
beyond the spray,
and the grasslands seemed
content with their lot.
Today I’ll jog to the forest boundary,
and from there begin stiffly striding out,
pacing myself for an hour’s journey,

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wandering inward upon a forest-trail
 hard-found,
 carrying me away and returning me home,
 far from the sea,
 the life-giving bathe, the salty air,
 but taking me home all the same,
 an energised man –
 ready for a river-cold shower,
 more at peace,
 my view on things a little clearer.

“A Wexford day before me”

Soon I will venture forth
 Along bemused country lanes
 In the pre-dawn stillness
 To find a remembered path
 Once covered with nettles,
 Leading to the pebbly banks
 Of the Owenavorrigh River.
 There I will listen to morning sounds
 And be warmed by sunlight’s buoyancy
 Plunging into the flowing clearness
 Under Ballinatray bridge.

“Lechon’s last night”

In New York, on 8 June 1956, Polish poet Jan Lechoń jumped out the window of his 12th-floor hotel room.

I.

I would have done well if I’d stayed in my bed,
 And not asked the night to compare depths of sadness,
 To feel that pounding despair in my heart and head.
 But if my life of three score had been otherwise,
 I’d be lounging in a hammock on a whitewashed patio,
 My mind being zapped into life by a morning espresso –
 The faintest of breezes cooling the sun-filled air.
 It could be a Greek island. But I’d settle for Sicily.
 And the long quiet day would stretch before me,
 With fine food cooked by a woman in her fiftieth year.
 And of an evening she’d keep my glass a quarter full,
 With each sip bringing new avenues of recall
 For a clutch of yarns guaranteed to greatly impress.
 She could follow my talk or not? It hardly matters.

II.

How close the night sky seems through the window,
Turned fluorescent by the lights of this city.
The blackness is gone and the stars are elsewhere.
I too should be elsewhere, in a garden silver-spun
By the light of the moon, fixed by time. Not here.
My elsewhere is awash with stars. And she. So mild.
Allows her voice to unravel my tangled mind.
She kisses my tear-filled eyes, pulls my bowed head
To her breast. And there am I, sobbing like a child.

III.

How lonely can a man be? It hardly matters.
But I am that man, alone in this room.
With my face pressed tightly to the window.
I look up and see a wrong-coloured sky.
I look down and see the light-filled street.

IV.

The pills once did their work but brought me no peace,
Only a sickening lunge into nausea and swirling emptiness,
Buffeted by black shadows, screeching though my being.
If I turned off the light and sat down on the dusty couch
I could perhaps recall my awakening; seeing my mother
Asleep on a chair beside my bed, lost to unsettled dreams.
She had journeyed into deep chasms of silver and black
And begged a compassionate angel to bring me back.

V.

What have I left to me now? Only thoughts that take me
To the cobbled streets of my youth in Warsaw,
Where I once saw an old man begging for pennies,
Speaking in what seemed the tongues of madness:
“Hanging over a precipice. I hold the crumbling ledge
With the clasping fingertips of my teetering mind,
As it cries silently: ‘I can give you your return,
Only do not let me fall. If I fall we are both lost.
The price must be paid and that is the cost.
You brave spiking bushes. The berry is found.
The price must be paid and that is the cost.
She prays that her children thrive. They follow God.
The price must be paid and that is the cost.’”
And he laughed, so as the whole street could hear.
All the while he eyed me sternly. What a stare!
I just walked on, feeling as if I’d been cut to the bone.
But now I know why. I should have thrown him a coin.

“Inshore”

I.

In silence I sat by the edge of the sea as the clapping rhythm of waves washed the shoreline. An old man I saw, tired and bedraggled, coming so close that he covered me in shadow, and forthwith he poured out his heart:

“The day and the mind of dreams have seldom met
Those signs seen by me, like comets of augury.
With my head in my hands, I cry: What is left!?
All we have left is a memory that grows distant,
Swearing oaths at our own demise, suffocated
By the oncoming silence. With me it became a ghost
In the dark, a tell-tale presence of conflict that dims
Daylight and fills what is left with sultry pride.
With eternity to think on things, bolted fast behind
Wooden doors, sending hatred in vapours through cracks
In the floors and walls. Murder, mayhem, and loss,
They all enter this domain. There will be no peace
Until some embassy on friendly terms braves what is there
And listens to the sorriest of tales a man could hear.
Like a child who is lost in a crowd and screams hot tears,
Like he, all will bewail my misfortune – left betwixt and between.”

With this he set me wandering – the mind ever more disturbed,
Traipsing in search of night-fires and lost in visions,
Toiling over a grey terrain, every road black and getting blacker.

Accursed with the seeing.

II.

In a wide-open place of fallen columns,
Surrounded by a world weighing its vines,
I spotted a friend’s resting place, wild-grown,
And weary, thought to sit and reminisce.
Sun-veils of rain brought gasps and laughter.
My wet eyes, half-shut and brushed by drizzle,
Espied rainfall’s passing but a moment after.
I felt happy there, filled with warm thoughts
Of the past and pleased with the sun’s heat.
Then an outraged cry turned my heart stone:
“Fetch yourself home! For is it not plain:
The human arena is not your domain.”
Like waking from a sleep of evil dreams,
My parched lips looked skyward for comfort.
But the words had anchored the pluming sky,

Drawing colour upwards, leaving only grey.
Then as man surely knows the sign of the cross,
I saw in this fall my own irreversible loss.

III.

I wandered a forest-trail that led towards soft mountains.
The night took on a heathery shade with the onset of darkness.
Winding at a pace through twisting paths, feeling my way through,
Worried about the worsening light, knocked about, unsure.
Fears proved right as a black beast trotted around the bend.
Head high and haughty, dog, wolf, or boar – I saw my end.
All three I feared the most, and all three it seemed to be.
“But how,” I cried, “could I be seeing this threesome thing I see?”
There was no third choice, but to fight or flee.

I set my course to the right and walked with care toward brush. It too swaggered slowly toward the brush. Wet wood lying on the forest floor was all I had to repel its charge and tusks. I must do, I knew, what I thought needs must, and run and run did I, pedalling hard and gliding over the terrain, making hard for the forest's edge – the leaf-filled world sliding by. It was there at the edge that I saw an old man, sitting on a bench and enjoying the quiet of the early day. The sun's breath was warm and the breeze was conducting a duet of dancing grass and working bees. “Old man,” I cried, “what is it that I've just seen? Big and black, bullish and bearish, rabid and wild, set to set itself upon me. As luck would have it, my legs kicked it off my heels in some hungry place back there.”

“Nonsense, child. Such creatures don't exist.
Still, you've twig-legged far before breakfast.
Your face tells tales of tall encounters,
Of aversion, loss and fear.
It's clear, too, your mind and soul are in a twist.
The question's what took you through there,
And how far you've left to traipse and wander?

Take this path anyhow. It runs to the bottom of that solitary mountain in the distance that overlooks a fine stretch of coast. Yes, the one that struggles with the wind beating its crown. Yes, that's the one: meadow-fair and fragrant at its waist, and with careworn granite that climbs toward the sky as it meets the sun's rays, blistering through the crown of slow-moving grey cloud. Make your way up there and embrace the lie of the land.”

With clear purpose I departed and walked toward the mountain with its silver head.

IV.

On the summit I saw stretching along the coast:
Hillocks, cliff heads, sea surf, barb-twists joining post,

Land-locking wide bays that embraced the curious tide,
 White waves, deep sea, the trampling surf in sea-slide,
 Salty green estuaries greeting a river's sea-bound flow,
 Grass – blade green – and seals, rippling fish shoals.
 Smiling times were these, this pulsing land, thrusting sea,
 This high peak, lofty space, this low sky tumbling free.
 My eyes were wind-watery, my cheeks were stung and flush,
 Surrounds that unfurled my soul, or at least I thought as much.
 A cry gushed forth like a paused sob when the hurt bites deep,
 Frenzied with turns and thoughts of sleepless sleep.
 Head low I stepped into the step-jolting descent,
 Chasing twilight towards the gloom-black haunt.

V.

Dark then, my eyes saw the black as well as can sleep. "Is this not a vengeance upon me," I cried, "to be more lost than ever in this open place, with the wind sweeping through me, and I upon this slope of the mountain." The howling and crashing, as if the mountain was tumbling to its knees, left me with no life at all. I dropped and crawled blindly for something and fell under a standing boulder in my path. Crawling under its lip, I lay there waiting for sun up. And memory fashioned an inner fire, a fire to keep hopes bright and at bay a biting dark. And the crisis gave way to song:

"If life has, as it seems, flung me astray,
 Then it is a trick of mind and memory,
 Some wrong voice that keeps sense at bay.
 Perhaps I hunt life's hiding story,
 That leaps over the sun-streaming horizons,
 Forever falling, and with it pulling me
 By an ethereal cord tied to my waist,
 Hurtling and pedalling over the world's edge –
 A retreating fall into things eyes fail to see."

And I laughed and cried at my poor attempts at good-cheer, as the entire night reverberated with the clamour of space that pummelled the rock, standing up to it all and extending itself outwards to keep me from getting too wet. "Things could be worse," said I, "and morning light can't be far away. So I'll pre-empt whatever song there'll be then, as the darkness is overpowered by grey and the blue breaks through: if that indeed be the course of events –

If I am a soul in pain,
 I'm surely not alone,
 Surely not the only one
 Wandering a darkened room.
 Lost in the emptiness
 Of this wandering home.
 I have celebrated with others
 And as well as the next.

And though often vexed,
 Contentment I've known,
 With it all sliding by,
 Thinking no more on
 The daily slings of misfortune,
 And quietly satisfied with
 The few occasions when I thought
 The world walked in my shadow
 And followed my step, and looked
 Upon my leaps, and shone upon
 My smiles. Indeed. Good days I have had."

Though morning broke reluctantly, soon all before my eyes sang a finer tune.

VI.

The return road, they say, is a pleasure
 Compared to the penance of an outward journey.
 All is familiar and the head is subtracting hard
 The time left from the time that it took.
 We are more decisive, some say.
 The road is better known, say others.
 Both true, I think, but in this instance...
 It is heart-strings that pull me home.
 Time passes when you're thinking
 And day-dreaming of the good times
 As you hope they'll be.
 To journey is necessary, but it is a failed enterprise
 If you cannot return.

VII.

The next morning I set off to the beach
 Where I love to sit and love to swim,
 Intending to plot my journey with each stone I'd skim,
 In an episodic form and according to skipping prowess,
 So as to refashion each story and vision
 And throw them to the waves,
 Where they may leap for life before sinking to the seabed.
 Some would overshoot an incoming wave,
 Whereas others dropped quickly into rushing surf.

In seeing one loses more than one gains,
 Like wind swiping the feet from under you,
 All is off centre and heavy is the strain
 From striding upon open roads and looking to the skies.
 But we are all making a journey home,
 And today, every stone that I have flung into the sea
 Will find its way once more to the shore.